

## T.R.Y.B.E. FORCE, Inc.

Truth and Reconciliation for Youth and Adults in Brotherhood and Sisterhood for Empowerment of All

Dear CT Legislators,

I am writing this letter in support of the Spanish Speaking Center of New Britain. T.R.Y.B.E. has been doing workshops for the SSC on nonviolence for the past year. Since we primarily work with youth and children I will be writing from that perspective. I have witnessed the extraordinary work that the Center is doing and the dedication to feeding the hungry and providing education & employment services and know that most of them go there because they have nowhere else to go. So when I heard of the cuts I was extremely concerned and puzzled as to why this program, a program that feeds, educates and helps employ woman, children and men would ever be on the chopping block. As human beings don't we have the right to life's most basic necessities? Shelter and food? And isn't it the duty of every man and woman to protect the rights of the next? What if it was your child who was going without?

We must recognize that this is bigger than just feeding kids. The money being taken will also cut their GED, ESL and employment training programs. They already lost one teacher and closed one Food Pantry with last years cuts. We all know what happens when youth go through life in poverty, often hungry, especially when school is out. Many become wards of the State. They are more likely to be incarcerated. This action sows the seeds of a domino effect that will create parental guilt, theft and poor health. It will add to the stress that poor parents already have and open the door for domestic violence. Furthermore, how can we expect our youth and children to perform academically if they are starving in the classroom or if they have no heat & hot water? It will lead to irritability, disruptive behavior, low testing scores and violence. And once again we will be blaming the youth even though we didn't give them the most basic needs for success. Do you want to be the person who denies food and other basic services to low-income families?

And when you go to sleep tonight, belly full with food; when you tuck your kids in tonight, just you remember that there are little empty bellies; adorable little children going to sleep with hunger pain and overwhelming weakness. Have you ever been hungry? Well imagine the horror of not knowing when that hunger will end. Imagine the horror of knowing that you will have to endure that pain and weakness all night and possibly well into the next day.

You have a choice to make. Not based on budgets, not based on job security, but morally. Your choice is a choice of the heart. Your choice is a choice between feeding the hungry and letting them go hungry. And in your heart you know what is right and what is just. You know that shelter and food is a fundamental right of every human being. You know we need to provide bilingual training opportunities so people can become self-sufficient. So I urge you to look within, and find the courage within your heart, and the force within your soul and do not reduce funding to the Spanish Speaking Center of New Britain.

Sincerely,

*Cedric Shaw*

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**The Spanish Speaking Center of New Britain is celebrating its 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this month.** We first opened in the basement of St. Mary's Church in 1964 to address the social, educational and cultural needs of the growing Hispanic population in New Britain. It has been located in 5 or 6 different locations thru the years, all in the downtown area for easy accessibility. We have always provided food pantry and case management services in addition to Spanish GED, English as a Second Language, Computer Training and Job Readiness and Job Search Assistance and have also been offering youth programming, including dropout prevention, conflict resolution / nonviolence skills, and college prep services. We remain the only Hispanic agency in our city where the Hispanic population is just over 30%.

Let me tell you about our typical caseload. In the first nine months of 2009 we served **1,755 Unduplicated households (not individuals)** – of these approximately 85% were at or below the 150% Federal Poverty Level. The other 15% were above the 150% but below 285% and experiencing temporary hardships. They may have utilized the food pantry a few times or they were paying more than 50% of their income towards rent and utilities and trying to improve their skills for better paying employment. Federal guidelines for receiving TEFAP supplemental food are more generous and allow access to anyone under 285% FPL. It was easy to satisfy our DSS contractual requirements of **800 individuals** for the CSV and **300** for the HHD programming. **Of the 1755 households served, 65% had one or more minor children and 15% were over the age of 62; many are in their 70's.** Approximately half of the households had 2 or more adults. Most individuals were served at least 6 times; many were served 15 - 18 times during the 9 month period as we encourage food pickups every 2 weeks to avoid emergencies. This **does not include the GED/ESL/Voc Training daily attendance** in those numbers. Using an average of 10 visits during the 9 months by 1755 households served, there were minimally **17,550 service units during 9 months.** Believe me, this is the low end estimate on total numbers served and does not include all the cases we resolve by telephone. We do this **with a budget of \$175,000 of which \$142,000 are the DSS contracts.** We are a staff of 5; 3 F.T. and 2 P.T. everyone performing more than one function. Even I am half-time administrator and half-time direct service.

All clients requesting Food Pantry services are required to complete an intake form and TEFAP eligibility form. Clients meeting income guidelines are screened for SNAP and or WIC eligibility, as well as energy assistance or other programs. They are also given information about how often they can pick up food at SSC and given a calendar of food distributions at this and the other sites in New Britain. We operate a Client Choice Pantry; clients are allowed to pick out their own items although some items are limited. Sometimes they inform us that we should get other types for foods to meet their dietary restrictions, although that is not often possible with our limited resources. What we do for them is encourage them to apply for food stamps to buy those items we cannot access and to take what they can use from us and the other free sources.

Clients with other issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, utility terminations, health issues and other social service needs are encouraged to meet with Maria Ortiz our Case Manager who has been with SSC for over 14 years. **The case-management provided here saves the state so much money. Our services typically would be billed to Title 19 for case-management at \$90 per hour by some providers; for us, it's part of our contract and not charged as fee for service.** If clients are employable but unemployed or underemployed they are enrolled in our Career Development programs, including ESL, GED, Computer training, Job Readiness and Life Skills workshops, etc. They are told about our open computer lab where they may receive help searching for employment, establishing an e-mail account and completing on-line job applications. This year we provided job readiness and job search assistance to about 400 people seeking employment. Due to the job market in our area only a third of these actually were

employed long term; most were referred to educational & training services. Services provided included weekly meetings, resumes, cover letters, interviewing techniques. Some of these workshops were done in collaboration with DOL and other providers who come to our site.

If clients are in need of services not provided by SSC they are given information on where and how to access those services. If they meet with the Case Manager she will make the referral herself and connect the client to the receiving agency. We have a good working relationship with most agencies in town and also utilize 211 when necessary to find additional services for our clients. We have started collaborating with the Community Health Center who is providing us with nutritional workshops for our clients who are concerned about diabetes and or obesity. We have had 4 groups thus far and are meeting with them to start up something on a regular basis for which they may provide us with a small amount of funding which would allow us to purchase nutritional supplements for participants enrolled in this specific component.

We continue to serve on the New Britain Food Security Collaborative and have attended meetings consistently over the last 2 years. In addition to sitting on the Collaborative I have been a member of the Steering Committee and the Self-Sufficiency sub-committee for more than a year. SSC maintains the Food Security's Website Calendar of Food distributions around town, listing each pantry's location, hours of operation and phone numbers. We assisted with the opening of the new pantry for residents of the Northwest corner of New Britain and have sent our volunteers to help out at other sites in the past as well. We also continue to operate the New Britain Food Hotline, providing information during office hours to callers about where they can access food any day of the week. It had been our intention to make this a 7 day, 24 hour access hotline with the NSP grant which was rescinded last year. We provide culturally appropriate services to the Latino community and also provide services in French and Polish as well thanks to our volunteers, students, and senior aides.

Because of the cuts we have suffered, we will already lost one GED teacher and have about 45 people on the waiting list to start this class. We also have waiting lists for ESL and Computer classes. Because of our deficit SSC staff started taking 2 monthly furlough days in order not to close down any of the programs completely. The other Food Pantry site which we closed down on North Street is sorely missed by the 150 senior citizens we were serving there and other families with young children and no transportation to get to other sites. We wish our services were not needed in New Britain, and that everyone had sufficient incomes to provide for their families needs. Since that's not the case, we are happy to provide these services to our community and only wish we had enough money to do higher end vocational training. We do not have the equipment we need or much money for supplies. We eliminated all mileage funding as well as staff training and other non-essentials. It's a bare-boned budget. I don't know how to make further cuts and remain open to serve the public. The HHD and CSV grants are the backbone of our agency's funding. If funding is reduced we will be forced to eliminate the GED classes, the only Spanish GED program in New Britain. People need to get their H.S. Diploma while learning English and preparing for jobs. It's their only chance at employment and it opens doors for further skills training. We may also need to close the doors of our remaining Food Pantry. Would you rather people continue their dependency on public assistance or worse yet, end up in jail for criminal behaviors to feed their families? **An increase to 6.5% sales tax would help; most shoppers won't even feel that.** It's shameful that we have to come here and beg for crumbs, competing with other much needed services. It's really a shame to balance the budget on the backs of the poor. Thank you for your attention.

Mary L. Sanders – Spanish Speaking Center of New Britain